Narration (00:02):

Yale Podcast Network. Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, YDS alum, Emily Judd, interviews Professor John Grim, a scholar of indigenous religions and co-director of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. Professor Grimm discusses what is shared amongst diverse indigenous religions and their practices.

Grim (00:29):

Many indigenous people have a sense of the cosmos as giving, and here are the people trying to give back.

Narration (00:36):

He shares wisdom and warnings from indigenous communities about the environment.

Grim (00:40):

Native elders say to us, we have been living in your future for 500 years. We already have that sense of dramatic traumatic change imposed upon us.

Narration (00:55):

And Professor Grim responds to climate change deniers.

Grim (00:59):

I would ask them to attend to communities around the planet, not simply their own particular community, but what do we see happening around the planet? And in that sense, it's undeniable.

Judd (01:15):

Professor Grim, you're a scholar of indigenous religions which are incredibly diverse in beliefs, cultures, practices. If you had to identify one shared belief across all indigenous religions, what would you say that is?

Grim (01:34):

If there's one shared characteristic of indigenous tradition, I would say it's land people's relationship to the land and biodiversity. And that raises for me as your questions will unfold so many understandings. It's an opening to earth relatedness. It's an opening to cosmology, it's an opening to justice. So I think these are things we'll talk about in your questions.

Judd (02:02):

So speaking of land, you have said in the past that your study of Native American religions naturally led to an interest in ecology. How would you describe the relationship that you witnessed between indigenous religions and the environment?

Grim (02:17):

Perhaps the most appropriate response is to try and give an image of a ritual that I have attended and participated in myself among or crow people. It's called the ritual. In English, we use the term Sundance. And in the Crow understanding a lodge is built and they call it the Great Lodge. And they go into this

stand, this lodge and dance for a period of time. And the dancers fast from food and water. And this sense of dancing in the cosmic lodge is a ritual that while we use the term Sundance in English, we misunderstand that the ceremonials we call Sundance on the Northern and Central Plains in North America extending into the southern plains. They're all quite different. They're all very unique to indigenous traditions of the people who are celebrating them. And among the crow, they build a lodge with 12 outer trunks of trees that are about 10 feet tall.

Grim (03:35):

They're placed in the ground, so they're buried a couple feet in the ground and they're jointed at the end so that at the center of this ring of 12 trees will be a cottonwood tree upwards of 60 feet tall, and they run rafters from the 12 outer to the central tree. So they're literally building a lodge. Every one of these trees is named. And as it's built, there are ritual specialists who are observing all of us, who are helping to build a lodge because it's quite an effort. Those the dancers generally come together to build it. And so as this structure is put together, those who are going to participate have the experience of what it is they're entering into what this cosmic lodge is about. And so the evening of the first day when this three, four, or five day ceremonial, it all depends on the sponsor in conjunction with the healers who come together to lead this ritual.

Grim (04:44):

The men and women who go into this stance, then they dress in ceremonial garb and they was paraded into the lodge in the evening. And at that moment, then they refrain from food and water for the period of the dance. So they're going increasingly into a state of somatic deprivation or in which they're embodied. Participation in the ritual is deeply personal, but primarily communal. And I think this is a dimension of indigenous thought, which is often misunderstood too, especially when we think about healing individuals as highly individualistic. It's much more communitarian. The whole point of this ceremonial is to acknowledge that the crow people have come into this region and they are asking permission of the land and of the animals, and of the air of the seasons. This is a bioregional renewal. So it's a moment of bringing the people together to both celebrate, to humble themselves, the fasting and the deprivation in order to request the world, which is a giving world in understanding many indigenous people have a sense of the cosmos as giving, and here are the people trying to give back.

Judd (06:09):

I love that idea of the universe as giving as a giver. What other inspiration from the wisdom of indigenous communities can we draw upon as non-indigenous peoples, especially when it comes to sustainability, environmental ethics?

Grim (06:26):

What native traditions have tried to teach us for centuries now is their own groundedness in human earth relations. And we really have not been able to hear that. We have now, from the seventies and the late 20th century, we have developed environmental consciousness, but we really haven't understood the depth of our ecological interdependence upon the earth. We glimpse it, but we still consume a great deal. So that sense of earth relatedness is one. And then the larger cosmological dimension, what it means. For example, Omaha peoples in that region of Nebraska, anthropologists very early on were visiting them and they became aware of a ceremonial, like a baptism of a child. And the Omaha called it introducing a child to the cosmos, English translation of their naming. And it was literally after a period of time when the child was believed to have survived and could be considered a member of the

community, that they brought the child out and they would go down the horizon and called the beings that they saw sky, star, sun, our sun, the weather, the birds, the animals, the grasses, all of this. You can imagine how long it could go. It could be a rather significant prayer for this child and all of the people participating, the family, that kind of cosmological awareness, we don't have it as a story or a ritual moment. We know we are headed into a very problematic future. Native elders say to us, we have been living in your future for 500 years. We already have that sense of dramatic traumatic change imposed upon us. So I sense that's another teaching that indigenous elders are very aware of.

Judd (08:42):

Now I want to pivot to your work on religion and environment more broadly. You co-founded and co-direct the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology with Professor Mary Evelyn Tucker, who is also your wife. You two are really the dynamic duo. The form is affiliated with both the School of the environment at Yale and Yale Vinni School. It's an interesting combination. Some people would say it's interesting because there are those who say religion and science or religion in the environment are separate disciplines. One has nothing to do with the other. I'm sure you've heard that before. What is your response to that?

Grim (09:22):

It's interesting the use of the word separate in that regard. I think it's the fundamental basis, or again, the philosophical or metaphysical understanding is that these are separate disciplines, religion and environmental studies. However, we might break them, divide them up there. They're simply human humanities and science based. They, they're separate. We obviously do not hold to that position. And our basis is largely out of the reality. So it's a kind of situational ethics, if I could use that kind of language that we have begun to realize that our situation now in terms of environmental concern is such that we have brought to bear on our environmental climate change, biodiversity loss, the range of the environmental crisis. We have brought policy and law and incredible science, and they are all necessary and they have brought us to incredible understandings and action. But one point, and it's a crucial point, is so obvious the environmental movement has been so easily subverted by those who deny or who simply do not want to attend or want to separate the issues as your question might suggest.

Grim (10:57):

And that separation or denial, I think is a inability to understand the values that have been absent in the environmental movement. We have not sufficiently attended or transmitted an understanding activated and drawn out among the larger population in the United States or in the western world. That environment is not something out there. We are totally embedded in it, and we need all of the powerful instruments and understanding of science. We need the policy positions, we need law in this regard, but we also need to attend to the values that move people. What motivates people to change behavior. And so that's what the religion and ecology project fundamentally has tried to bring to the fore that religions in their historical developments, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, confusion, all of the religions of the world have interacted with local bioregions, have interacted with the local land communities, have been in relationship to animals. And in the tradition, not only the scriptures, but the commentaries on the scriptures are filled with understandings of what we are call religious ecology and religious cosmology, ways of relating the local and the cosmological to behavior and ethics.

Judd (12:36):

I really applaud the work that you and Professor Tucker are doing together, making religious leaders and religious teachings part of the solution to the climate crisis, which some people say the climate crisis is a hoax or that it's just part of the natural cycle of earth. How do you engage when you're faced with climate change denial?

Grim (12:58):

And I think the science is just crucial here, and it provides a very interesting reflection on indigenous traditions. If I could just make this draw back on that in my teaching, I have increasingly for the last 40 years, retreated from the word religion. When I talk about indigenous traditions, I do not erase it. I use the term, so I don't consider it inappropriate, but what I'm trying to do is to reflect with students that the term religion has a great deal of baggage with it. We've already talked about this, the expectations of architecture, roles, doctrines, and so forth. And that among indigenous traditions, you don't find their spiritual yearning and expression expressed in these ways. So I use the term lifeway, and the reason I find lifeway very helpful is that it doesn't separate out dimensions of a community's life, say governance, medicine or education.

Grim (14:04):

It doesn't separate them into separate realms, but it recognizes that the spiritual value of people in relationship to reality is embedded in the way they educate people, the way they undertake healing, the way they undertake governance. So I sense that teaching is part of what I would lay out with someone who's undertaking a climate denial or saying that it's a hoax or it's just a long-term phase. And I would ask them to attend to communities around the planet, not simply their own particular community, but what do we see happening around the planet? And in that sense, Emily, it's undeniable. We have moved into periods of incredible intense rainfall weather situations where attribution can be questioned about how much is climate change. But a great deal of scientific study has gone into how much of a particular storm can we now talk about and attribute to these changing heat trapping gas situations.

Judd (15:23):

So before we end, I want to get your thoughts on one new project and yield of a new school that I think is a model of climate action. And that's the Living village, which is this sustainable residential space. There's tours going on now actually of the Living Village before it opens. I believe it's going to open next year. It's going to house around 50 students. It will produce zero waste. What message do you think that this project sends to the world?

Grim (15:53):

My first response is leadership Dean Greg Sterling has been instrumental in moving this project forward, and it's a community response, and I think that's very important that I think the dean also would locate it in the larger, wide, yes, even the Yale community, but it couldn't have happened without leadership. When Mary Evelyn and I first discussed with Dean Sterling, the joint degree program, YDS or YSE and Religion and Ecology and its relationship to the living building, our response was, could we also talk about living program in relation? And the dean has been very accommodating, and I think it's even part of the discussion. So for me, this is just a total affirmation of what I see happening on the ground at YDS at Yale writ large. I really hope that the School of the environment can enter into a much more affirming understanding and a kind of closer relationship with the Divinity School. And I think this is happening. It takes time for these projects to really the full dimension of how they affect our life way. And I think as

students live in it, as the community sees this building in its living dimensions, this enlivened and embodied living dimension of human earth relationships will come to the fore.

Judd (17:34):

Thank you so much, professor Grim, for joining us today on the podcast and for discussing both indigenous religions and the environment.

Grim (17:42):

Thank you, Emily.

Speaker 1 (17:44):

Thanks for listening today. We hope you'll tune in again for the next episode of the YDS Quad Cast. I.